

Right: Students gleefully burn the Empangeni Transport pamphlets which urged them to board the buses and break the boycott.
Below: The chairman of the Co-ordinating Committee, Mr S Z Conco, tells the department of Transport's committee of enquiry about the company's bad attitude towards commuters.



MORE than 60 000 workers living near Richards Bay and Empangeni have been boycotting Empangeni buses since January 14 in protest against the company's poor service.

The three-month-old boycott was sparked off when Empangeni Transport, a subsidiary of United Transport, hiked up its bus fares.

According to independent research, the fare on one route was increased by 125 percent.

WE WILL NOT RIDE!

And on the route between Empangeni and Esikhwini, the fares have gone up by 320 percent over the past six years.

However, fares are not the only problems that commuters in the area have experienced with Empangeni Transport.

The commuters have complained that the buses are extremely overloaded and filthy and that they rarely run according to the schedule.

'Empangeni Transport also does not consult the commuters. Any communication is merely one way,' a worker told FOSATU Worker News.

'The attitude of the company is to rake as much profit as possible even at the expense of the comfort, convenience and safety of the commuters,' he added.

At mass meetings on January 15 in Nseleni, Esikhwini and Ngwelezane townships, commuters resolved to have 'nothing more to do with the company'.

At the Esikhwini meeting, which was attended by about 15 000 people, a committee of ten was elected in order 'to seek out another transport service'. Eight out of the ten committee members are active members of FOSATU unions in the area.

Since then, representatives from all the townships and some rural areas have come together to form a Co-ordinating Committee.

The committee's first task was to find alternative transport for the boycotters who faced a 30 kilometre or more walk to work.

They met with local business representatives some of whom agreed to provide private transport for their workers — this has taken the form of mini-buses, bakkies, lorries and buses.

The committee also arranged for taxi owners to reduce their fares. In Esikhwini and Nseleni, the taxi owners agreed to reduce their fares by as much as 30 percent during peak commuter hours.

'This position has not changed even with the fuel increase,' a committee member said.

For the schoolchildren, the

committee organised for three other independent bus operators to come in and assist.

On January 18, the Co-ordinating Committee decided to appeal to the Minister of Transport, Hendrik Schoeman, to set up a committee of enquiry to look into the problems.

After a meeting between top officials of the department of Transport and the Co-ordinating Committee, the Minister agreed to set up a two-man committee of enquiry.

In the meantime, the bus company stepped up its campaign to break the boycott using Radio Zulu and by distributing pamphlets to schoolchildren.

The pamphlets appealed to schoolchildren to begin using the buses because, the company said, they were merely 'victims' of a situation which did not concern them.

At the usual Sunday mass meeting in the townships, the pamphlets were symbolically burnt by the very schoolchildren they were meant to appeal to.

On February 11, 12 and 13, the committee of enquiry headed by Emile Nicsh visited the area and heard representations from the commuters, local businessmen and the bus company.

Over 6 000 boycotters attended the hearing on February 11 forcing the committee of enquiry to hold the hearing in the open air.

In a festive mood the boycotters cheered when members of the Co-ordinating Committee read out their grievances and booed when things favourable to the transport company were said.

A week after the committee of enquiry's visit, the Minister of Transport issued a press statement appealing 'most strongly' to all commuters to 'terminate' the boycott.

Schoeman suggested 'in order to ensure ongoing communication' that a joint transport liaison committee be set up consisting of representatives from the Zululand Chamber of Commerce, the Chamber of In-

dustries, the Afrikaanse Sakekamer, the KwaZulu government, the Local Authorities and local chiefs.

No mention was made of the Co-ordinating Committee elected by the boycotters.

The Minister also said that he would be taking the necessary steps 'to ensure compliance with the Transportation Act'.

In practice, this would mean prosecution of taxi owners who continued to assist in providing transport.

Understandably, the statement was greeted with alarm by the Co-ordinating Committee which demanded an immediate meeting with Schoeman.

Soon after the demand for a meeting was made, the Minister released a further press statement which added the Co-ordinating Committee to the

suggested joint liaison committee and withdrew the threat of prosecution under the Transportation Act.

At the Cape Town meeting on February 25, according to a member of the Co-ordinating Committee, Schoeman agreed in principle to the boycotters' demand that other bus companies be allowed to operate in the area.

The Minister also agreed that there should be an agreement negotiated between the commuters and the bus company.

On February 28, the Co-ordinating Committee once again met the department of Transport's Emile Nicsh where it demanded that the 1984 fares remain in force and that the Minister actively promote competition from other bus companies.

It also demanded that taxi drivers be allowed to operate freely between Empangeni and Richards Bay — at present they are only allowed to operate legally within the townships.

And any future bus company should commit itself to the social welfare of the communities, the committee demanded.

As FOSATU Worker News went to press, the boycott was continuing while commuters waited for a response to the demands.

'Although, the present transport arrangements are adequate, they are certainly not comfortable,' a Richards Bay worker said.

'But we do not care whether they are comfortable or not as long as we achieve our objective — a more satisfactory transport service,' he added.



Metal and Allied Workers Union president, Jeffrey Vilane, speaks to 5 000 people at a boycott meeting in Esikhwini